CHAPTER 4

COMMENTS ON LINGUISTIC ARGUMENTS RELATING TO INSCRIPTION ONE

William J. Gedney

I think I had better begin by summarizing briefly what is known about the early history and the prehistory of the Thai language. This account is intended to be comprehensible to non-linguists.

The language known as Thai or Central Thai or Siamese, the dialect of Central Thailand and now the standard language of the country, belongs to what is called the Tai language family. A convention has become widely accepted by which the spelling Thai is used for the language of Thailand, but the spelling Tai for the family.

By the term language family, linguists mean a group of languages which can be demonstrated to be divergent continuations of a single original language.

Spoken language is always undergoing change. As peoples become separated geographically, their languages may undergo different changes, to the point where after a sufficient passage of time two languages which were once the same may become so different as to be mutually unintelligible.

Changes may involve sounds, or grammar, or vocabulary. Linguists are blessed above students of other aspects of earlier culture in being able to utilize a wonderful general principle, that sound change is always regular; that is, if a sound change

takes place, it affects all occurrences of the sound or sounds involved. If the sound *b* changes to *p,* then all the words having the *b* sound will be affected. If the sound *k* changes to *s* before certain vowels but remains *k* elsewhere, then all occurrences of the sound *k* will be so affected. If subsequent changes in the vowels obscure this conditioning factor, then so much more work for the linguist to figure out what has happened.

The task of the historical linguist, when confronted with two or more languages that seem similar but show differences, is to figure out what sound changes have occurred in each of the languages to bring about the differences. Not until this has been accomplished can the two languages be regarded as genetically related. And he tries to figure out what sound system the original single language could have had, or must have had, to account for the sound systems of the later languages.

In all of this we are talking about spoken language. Some languages during the course of time acquire writing systems. Early written records, especially if they are dated, may be of great help in working out the history of a language. But writing systems do not always represent the sound systems accurately, and so written records must be used with care. So linguists depend primarily on data from spoken languages.

The assumed single parent language of a language family is called the proto-language of the group. Proto-Tai, the assumed single prehistoric original language of which all modern Tai languages and dialects are divergent continuations, has been pretty well reconstructed. We are certain of the tone system, and pretty much all of the consonant system. For the vowels, it is possible to do fairly well at reconstructing a vowel system for each of two main branches, a Northern and a Southern, but no one has yet been able to reconcile these two in a single proto-Tai vowel system.

Most linguists now believe that Proto-Tai was spoken far to the east, probably in southeastern China. As regards date, scholars believe that Proto-Tai was spoken by a single group of people about two thousand years ago, or less, mainly because

the degree of divergence seems to be about the same as in other language families whose history is better known.

Of course Proto-Tai did not spring up out of nothing. Other languages have been found in southeastern China and on the island of Hainan which seem to be related to Tai but cannot be fitted into the Tai family. Some day scholars will figure out exactly how these languages are related to each other and to Tai, and then, still utilizing the principle of regular sound change, reconstruct a still earlier proto-language for the larger group.

Proto-Tai had three tones. We are certain of this because only by reconstructing these three tones, and figuring out which word originally had which tone, are we able to account for what we find in each of the modern Tai languages and dialects.

By far the largest number of words had what is called the A tone, more than all the others combined. This appears to have been the normal, or, as linguists say, the unmarked tone. Two other smaller groups of words had what are called the B tone or the C tone. Just how these two other tones differed from each other and from the A tone we do not know. Some think it may have been a matter of voice quality rather than pitch as in modern tone languages. But we do not need to know what these tones sounded like. What we need, and have, is an understanding of the structure of the system.

There was also a fourth category, words ending in the consonants *p, t,* and *k*. These are said to have had the D tone, but actually these syllables were undifferentiated tonally, and so might better be called toneless.

As the Tai-speaking peoples separated and scattered over a wide area of southern China and Southeast Asia, each group made changes in its sound system, in the consonants and vowels, but strangely, the three-way tone system, plus the fourth toneless category, persisted everywhere for a long time, apparently many centuries. There may have been, and undoubtedly were, differences from place to place in the way each tone was pronounced, but the system remained structurally intact. Interestingly, other tonal language families in the Far East, for

example Chinese and Miao-Yao, also had tone systems like this during the same period.

But finally a convulsive change occurred in this tonal system, sweeping across all Tai languages and dialects and also languages and dialects of other families of tonal languages in the Far East and Southeast Asia, such as Chinese.

What happened everywhere was that each earlier tone split into two or more tones, depending upon the phonetic characteristics of the initial consonant of the syllable at the time. In many places what made the difference was voiced versus voiceless initial consonant, for example *b* vs. *p*. In other places other features came into play, for example a friction sound like *f* vs. a clean stop sound like *p*.

And then drastic changes also occurred in these initial consonants. In some places previously voiced sets of consonants became voiceless, or vice versa. In fact it was these consonant changes, after the tone splits, that brought about the new tone systems, because without these consonant changes there would have been merely two manners of pronouncing the original tone, automatically determined by the consonant.

For example, in Thai, earlier *hmaa* 'dog' and *maa* 'to come' both had the A tone, but differed in initial consonant. After the tonal splits, the word for 'dog' acquired what is today a rising tone, while 'to come' had what is now mid-level tone. But then the word for 'dog' lost its preaspiration, so that its initial *m* was no different from the initial *m* of 'to come,' and the two words now differed only in tone.

Many languages, after these changes, ended up with six-tone systems. Some, for example Central Thai, have five tones. After the changes, the fourth category of stopped or checked syllables developed tonal differentiation, as in Central Thai *màak* 'areca' vs. *mâak* 'much,' and *phàk* 'vegetable' vs. *phák* 'to rest.'

If every language and dialect had made exactly the same changes, we would be helpless to figure out what happened and what the previous sound system was; one could not prove that

the original language had anything different from the single undifferentiated universal later system.

But the fact is that the details of the changes were different from place to place. Students of comparative Tai linguistics have had the task, and the fun, of figuring out what changes occurred in each language or dialect, and what the previous state of affairs must have been. It is this work that has produced our present fairly complete understanding of the prehistory of each Tai language and dialect, and of Proto-Tai, at least as regards the sound system.[1]

Non-tonal languages in the area, such as Mon and Khmer, also underwent convulsive changes, presumably at about the same time. These languages split not tones, which they did not have, but rather the vowels, depending upon the phonetic nature of the initial consonant, so that each earlier vowel or diphthong became two, with at some places also two different voice qualities. Thus earlier Khmer *kaa* (with voiceless initial) remained *kaa,* but earlier *gaa* (with voiced initial) became *kea.* The result is that modern Khmer dialects have very complicated vowel systems, differing from place to place.

At many points in the Tai-speaking areas of Southeast Asia, writing systems arose at the end of the 13th century, during the 14th century, and later. These utilized alphabets ultimately of Indic origin, previously used in this area for writing more prestigious non-Tai languages such as Sanskrit, Pali, Mon, and Khmer.

In some places, notably in Inscription One at Sukhothai, the tones were represented in the script, with A-tone words unmarked, B-tone words marked with the symbol now known as *máy ʔèek,* and C-tone words marked with the symbol now known as *máy thoo.* The toneless words ending in *p, t,* and *k* were written without tone mark. At many other places no attempt was made to mark the tones.

These tone marks are clear evidence that at the time when the Sukhothai inscriptions were made, the convulsive sound changes we have been describing had not yet taken place. Further

proof is found in the way consonants were handled. Combinations of the letter *h* with other consonants, as in the word *hmaa* 'dog,' were used not only at Sukhothai but throughout the area, to represent sounds which, even without any written evidence, linguists would have had to reconstruct as having been originally voiceless. And the Indic letters for voiced sounds like *b, d,* and *g* were used for Tai sounds which linguists know were earlier voiced, though nowadays, after the changes, they have everywhere become voiceless, in some areas *p, t,* and *k,* in other areas *ph, th,* and *kh.*

As has often happened throughout the world, the writing systems developed in those early times for the old three-tone Tai languages and dialects remained essentially unchanged after the great sound changes had occurred, and have persisted to this day. Where no tone marks were ever devised, as in White Tai and Black Tai in northwestern Vietnam, the result nowadays is frequent ambiguity. Often a written word in those languages can be pronounced in a number of different ways.

At places where tone marks were utilized, as in Central Thailand, the result was that, after the great sound changes, in order to read and write one had to learn complicated rules, and the terms "high," "mid," and "low" consonant letters came into use. As everyone knows, the awful consequences still afflict everyone, whether a Thai schoolchild or an adult foreigner, who undertakes to learn to read and write the language.

When did these cataclysmic sound changes, the tonal splits and the radical changes in consonant sounds, occur? Since these changes took place over a large area of the Far East and Southeast Asia, it is to be assumed that they began somewhere and spread. Some day we may know. If, as seems possible, they began in China, students of the history of Chinese dialects may eventually be able to show where the changes began and how they spread.

So far as Central Thailand is concerned, all evidence points to a date somewhere in the middle of the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767 A.D.).

As we have seen, the earlier sound system was intact at the time of the devising of Thai and Tai writing systems at Sukhothai and elsewhere. The writing system remained unchanged after the great sound changes, so that even to this day the Thai writing system does not reveal that the language has five tones. This would be shown if a new writing system had been devised with, for example, a single letter for the sound *ph,* and five tone marks (or four symbols, with one tone unmarked), but this, of course, has never happened.

But spelling errors in dated materials are sometimes revealing, when a distinction between formerly different sounds has been lost, and scribes use the historically incorrect spelling. Thus anyone wanting to try to date the loss of the distinction between *r* and *l* in modern Bangkok speech might find evidence from spelling errors in dated materials as to when this began to happen, perhaps in the late 19th century.

Many modern Central Thai words with third or falling tone come from one source, spelled with a high consonant and the second tone mark, while another group of third-tone words come from another source, spelled with a low consonant and the first tone mark. The word *khâa* 'to kill' belongs historically to the first of these two categories, but has now come to be spelled in the second way. A study of dated materials might reveal when this coalescence in sounds took place, and so give us a clue as to the date of the great sound changes.

As we shall see in a moment, Anthony Diller has been able to prove that a sound distinction which the language had when Inscription One was composed had been lost by the time of some of the other Sukhothai inscriptions, because a formerly consistent spelling distinction was later confused.

Loanwords, words borrowed by one language from another, are sometimes revealing. Khmu, a non-Tai language, has a great many words borrowed from Tai which still today show some of the old consonant values, for example initial *hm* in words where we know that Tai languages earlier had a preaspirated *hm* initial, Khmu not having altered this particular type of

sound, but we have no way of knowing when Khmu borrowed these words from some Tai dialect.

The great bulk of Indic loanwords in Tai languages, words from Sanskrit and Pali, were borrowed when the old sound system was still intact. For example, Indic words containing the sounds *b, d,* and *g,* were borrowed into Tai languages, and also Khmer, when these sounds in Tai and Khmer were still voiced *b, d,* and *g,* and subsequently went through the great sound changes along with native words. But these patterns of borrowing got so firmly established among the literate that even after the great sound changes occurred, Indic words borrowed into Tai languages, especially the increasingly prestigious Central Thai dialect of Ayutthaya and Bangkok, followed the old rules, since in later times it was all done through spelling, not through listening to the spoken pronunciation. As a matter of fact until very recently Thai students of Sanskrit and Pali read those languages with the *altered* Thai sound values. Buddhist monks from Thailand who go to Sri Lanka to study complain about having to relearn how to read Pali, to say *d,* for example, where they have always said *th.* When a modern Thai makes up a new term using Sanskrit and Pali elements, he uses the later *ph* for Indic *b.*

Words borrowed from Khmer or Cambodian are numerous in the Sukhothai inscriptions, but the great mass of Cambodian loanwords appear to have come into Thai during the early centuries of the Ayutthaya period, presumably about the time of, or after, the conquest of Angkor by the Thais in the 15th century. And during this period Thai also borrowed and came to make great use of Cambodian verse-forms, which constitute the category called *kàap* in Thai literature. And all this Cambodian material came into Thai while both Thai and Cambodian still had their old sound systems intact. That is why Cambodian loanwords in Thai always preserve the older Cambodian vowel values; for example, written *aa* is always pronounced *aa,* never *ea* as often in modern Cambodian.

With very few exceptions, the thousands of words which Thai borrowed from Indic languages (Sanskrit and Pali) and

from Khmer or Cambodian all acquired in Thai the A tone or, in checked syllables, the so-called D tone, suggesting that at that time these Thai tones were somehow neutral, perhaps mid-level, and so seemed most similar in pitch to the non-tonal donor languages.

Native Thai verse forms are also illuminating. Early Thai poetry was composed in the forms called *khlooŋ* and *râay*. These forms depend upon syllable count (usually five syllables to the line), rhyme, and most importantly, on the obligatory use of words with certain tones at particular points in the line and stanza. At some points a word with the old B tone is required (a checked syllable of the fourth category may be substituted here), and at other points a word with the old C tone. Traditional Lao poetry also makes great use of verse forms of this type.

A number of great literary classics were composed in these old metres in the early centuries of the Ayutthaya period. But some Thai poets continued to compose poetry in these metres even after the great sound changes had taken place. It then became a matter of adhering to spelling rules, rather than sound. School-teacherish types still compose poetry in these old metres to this day, no doubt with the pleasant glow of self-satisfaction of a highly literate elite.

Since the late 18th century, the most popular Thai verse form has been *klɔɔn,* whose structure is based on the modern five-tone sound system. It is significant that this form, which would have been impossible until after the great sound changes, did not appear until the end of the Ayutthaya period.

So we have overwhelming evidence, from the writing system, from the treatment of loan words, and from verse forms, that the old sound system was intact during the Sukhothai period and during the early centuries of Ayutthaya. Older Cambodian poetry, believed to date from about this same period, was also clearly composed before the great sound changes took place, as shown by the rhymes, where the old vowel values were intact.

So it seems highly probable that we must date the great

sound changes, at least for Central Thailand, somewhere midway in the Ayutthaya period.

Recent research in Mon epigraphy has turned up evidence from Thai loanwords occurring in dated Mon inscriptions, that in the late 15th century in Central Thailand the sound changes in Thai had not yet taken place. These findings are perhaps the first concrete evidence we have for the date of the changes.

There are reported to be Tai dialects on both sides of the border between China and Vietnam in which even today the changes have not yet gone to completion. The tones have split but the voiced initials have not devoiced. For example, speakers of one such dialect are reported to call themselves *dai,* still pronounced with a voiced *d.* The French scholar A.G. Haudricourt called attention to these dialects many years ago, and I am told that they are also discussed briefly in a recent Chinese publication. For these dialects to have failed even yet to complete these changes is less surprising now that we realize that the rest of the area made the changes only a few centuries ago, perhaps even more recently in some places.

It is only in recent years that we who work in this field have come to the conclusion that the great sound changes took place so late in Central Thai. Most scholars in the past have been silent about this question of date, but some have from time to time said rather vaguely that the sound changes probably occurred about a thousand years ago, with Sukhothai for some reason not making the changes until later. It may take some time for us all to get used to the idea that the changes took place so recently as midway through the Ayutthaya period.

Now let us examine the treatment of these questions of linguistic history and prehistory in the flurry of scholarly literature in both English and Thai produced in recent years on both sides of the question as to whether Sukhothai Inscription One is authentic or a fake.

Many authors writing about Inscription One have had no occasion to get into these matters, because they deal with nonlinguistic topics, or because even though they discuss language,

they are talking about such things as the meaning of particular words, so that we cannot tell what views they hold, if any, on these larger questions of linguistic history.

But some of the most active among those who claim that the inscription is a fake deal with these questions a great deal, as do some of the authors who regard the inscription as authentic.

The story of what happened in the history of the language is so straightforward, so coherent, essentially so simple, with so many mutually reinforcing kinds of evidence to confirm it, that it is amazing and disheartening to see how some of the scholars now questioning the authenticity of Inscription One have gotten the story so badly tangled up. What they offer us is a grotesque distortion of Thai linguistic history.

For the sake of brevity I will call those who argue that Inscription One is a fake the Young Turks or devils. Those who defend the authenticity of the inscription I will call the fuddy-duddies or angels. If anyone wishes to charge that these labels reveal a bias, I cheerfully admit it..

Noteworthy among the works of the fuddy-duddies or angels is Anthony Diller's article "Consonant Mergers and Inscription One," now published in the *Journal of the Siam Society*.* He deals with a range of questions of linguistic history and prehistory, but focuses on the distinction in Inscription One between two sets of words. One set is spelled with the letter now called *khɔɔ khày,* such as *khìi* 'to ride,' *khùt* 'to dig, 'and *khâw* 'rice' (nowadays pronounced and spelled with a long vowel). Another set of words is spelled with the letter now called *khɔɔ khùat,* such as *khăay* 'to sell,' *khâw* 'to enter,' and *khwăa* 'right (hand).'

Burnay and Coedès found many years ago that this spelling distinction corresponds to a sound distinction still alive and

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* *See Chapter 3, p. 161, of this volume.*

well in the White Tai language spoken in northwestern Vietnam. The first set of words is pronounced in White Tai with an initial aspirated *kh,* like the *kh* sound of modern Central Thai. The second set is pronounced in White Tai with an initial voiceless velar fricative, like the so-called *ach*-sound of German. Many other more remote Tai languages also keep these two sets of words distinct.

Diller reexamines and refines and corrects all the evidence in this matter in a masterly and definitive manner, and also presents a thorough analysis of various theories about the prior history of these sounds. He demonstrates that in the dialect of the author of Inscription One the distinction between these two sounds was still consistently made, but in the dialects represented even in the other Sukhothai inscriptions the distinction had been lost.

Fang Kuei Li has recorded a dialect of Lue in which the distinction is preserved, as in White Tai. Other dialects of Lue, including that of the capital city of Chieng Rung, and also the variety of Lue spoken across the border in Burma to the west, have, like Central Thai, lost the distinction. I have been told by Chao Kham Lue, Deputy Director of the Institute for National Minorities at Kunming, who is a member of the former ruling family of Chieng Rung, and of course a native speaker of Lue, that it is the extreme southeastern part of the Lue-speaking area of Sip Song Pan Na that has preserved the distinction. This is just across the border from the area in Vietnam where White Tai is spoken.

Diller's article is a model for its meticulous accuracy in detail (everyone among the Young Turks who has dealt with this *kh* question has, by comparison, been embarrassingly sloppy), its thoroughness of research, and its soundness of method and assumptions. It is an important contribution to the field of comparative Tai linguistics. It seems safe to predict that decades from now, when most of what is now being written on both sides of the present controversy will have been forgotten, or at best read as amusing curiosities of antique scholarship, this Diller article will still be studied with admiration and profit.

Before tackling the Young Turks, I must, with apologies, make some personal remarks. Some of the leaders among the Young Turks or devils are among my oldest friends, whose previous work I have in the main admired greatly. I have known and respected Dr. Michael Vickery and his work for a quarter of a century. Dr. Nidhi Aeusrivongse has earned a fine scholarly reputation for the new insights he has brought to many aspects of Thai history. These scholars, who are historians, not linguists, have been much influenced in matters relating to Thai and Tai linguistics by my old friend and former student Dr. James Chamberlain. From student days, Chamberlain liked to come up with maverick ideas. In those days I tended to laugh these off as evidence of youthful high spirits and a healthy inclination to try out new ideas. As the years have passed I have been distressed to note that he has not recovered from these early wild ideas, and has apparently had some success in peddling them among non-linguists in Thailand, so that I have wondered whether I ought to blame myself from not having tried to rescue him from his wicked ways when he first showed evidence of having jumped the tracks intellectually.

I am truly sorry that I am going to have to say some very negative things about these scholars. I have been trying to figure out how to be diplomatic but also truthful, but have found no way. When nonsense is uttered, and appears to have gained some acceptance, it is time to be frank, at the risk of turning old friends into enemies. If I seem to make more use of the sledgehammer than the scalpel, please blame the limitations of time.

First Major Fallacy: Dating the great sound changes much too early.

Although wrong-headed in many serious ways, as we shall see in a moment, Dr. Michael Vickery's article "The Ram Khamhaeng Inscription: A Piltdown Skull of Southeast Asian History?" * is thoroughly researched and clearly argued. To his

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* Chapter 1, p.1, this volume.

credit, Vickery has made a serious study of the work of the great master of comparative Tai linguistics, the late Fang Kuei Li. Also very sound is his rejection of the now discredited notion, which originated many years ago with a Protestant missionary publishing in Hong Kong, that the Tai-speaking people came into what is now Thailand from a Tai-speaking kingdom of Nan Chao to the north, a myth which has unfortunately persisted to this day, among some historians and textbooks. Vickery has made another valuable contribution in urging scholars to give more attention to other Sukhothai inscriptions besides Inscription One.

But Vickery goes astray in arguing that the great sound changes occurred early, before Sukhothai. Here are some quotations:

> "...a devoicing of Proto-Tai voiced initials long before the Sukhothai period, and well before there is evidence of Thai settlement within Thailand, perhaps as early as the 8th century." *

> "Later advances in Thai linguistics have shown that the tone splits differentiating the 'high' and 'low' consonants occurred well before the Sukhothai period." ** [What later advances? Most of us in Thai linguistics would not regard Chamberlain's wild ideas, to which Vickery is presumably referring, as "advances."]

> "For the tone-mark system to be rational and useful each tone mark would have had to indicate the same tone for each consonant series [Bingo! This is exactly what was done.], a situation which has not existed since at least the time of PSWT [Proto-Southwestern Tai] 2000 years ago, if not much earlier." **

Wow! Soon we'll be back to the old myth of Tai origins in the Altai Mountains in 5000 B.C.!

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* P. 9, this volume.

** P. 15 , this volume.

The Young Turks devote pages and pages to erroneous or irrelevant matters, but never once provide a shred of evidence for their claim that the great sound changes occurred early. Just saying it repeatedly doesn't make it so.[2]

Dr. Nidhi Aeusrivongse has three articles in the special issue of *Sinlapa Watthanatham* devoted to the controversy surrounding Inscription One. These three articles are, as usual with Dr. Nidhi, filled with interesting ideas, and as also usual with his work, he has done thorough and wide-ranging reading. In these articles his Thai style is marvellous, always clear and straightforward, often witty. This is in welcome contrast to some of his previous publications, where, although the ideas presented are interesting and important, the Thai style is often difficult and awkward. Sometimes one has felt that the sentence was thought out first in English and then translated literally into Thai, so that sometimes the reader can't make out the meaning until he stops and figures out how the sentence would have been worded in English. This change is welcome.

Dr. Nidhi's declared intention is praiseworthy; it is to make available to Thai readers who don't know English the ideas that Vickery has advanced. He does a fine job of this, to the degree that he himself becomes an ardent advocate of the views of Vickery and Chamberlain, especially in the third and longest of his three articles. Although this may not have been his original intention, he has put himself in a leading position on the side of the Young Turks or devils. Vickery and Chamberlain could not have asked for a more eloquent and enthusiastic apostle to preach their gospel, written in English, to the Thai multitudes.

He says at one point: "Therefore this question of voiced initial consonants in the Sukhothai language is a matter that leads to great confusion." (p. 73) How true, if one holds the benighted views of the Young Turks!

The Young Turks get into terrible trouble again and again when they try to reconcile their assumption that the great sound changes, particularly the change of certain voiced initial consonants to voiceless, occurred in both Thai and Cambodian long before the time of the Sukhothai inscriptions, and before the

borrowing of Indic and Cambodian words into Thai. They seem to be saying that Sukhothai speakers knew that certain consonant letters had formerly represented voiced sounds, so although these sounds had now become voiceless, they knew that they must treat them as voiced in the writing system and in the loanwords.

And they have to argue that those who devised the system of tone marks for Thai knew enough to divide the consonants into three classes according to phonetic criteria which, according to them, had not existed for some centuries. And the Cambodians had to devise rules as to how to read vowel symbols one way or another depending on whether the initial consonant belonged to one category or another in a system which they claim had not existed since prehistoric times.

It's difficult to figure out what they mean in all this. One feels sorry for Dr. Nidhi, trying to explain it all in Thai. Indeed, he sometimes remarks parenthetically that he is not sure he has understood the English original correctly. One wonders if they themselves have a clear and rational understanding of what they are saying, or of the implications.

But since it is all rubbish, we need not bother our heads much about it.

Second Major Fallacy: P and PH languages.

Dr. Chamberlain has in a number of publications expounded a classification of Tai languages into two groups, the P group and the PH group. P languages are those which have changed earlier voiced *b* to voiceless unaspirated *p*. PH languages are those which have changed earlier voiced *b* to voiceless aspirated *ph* (as in modern Central Thai).

The trouble with this classification is that it uses as its basic criterion something very late in the history of these languages, but Chamberlain wants to make it very early. It is as if a botanist were to propose abandoning the traditional classification of flowering plants into families and genera, and replacing it by two new big categories, those with yellow flowers and

those with red flowers.

Many Tai languages covering a large area have changed initial *r* to *h,* as in Lao. It would make as much sense to speak of R languages and H languages as P and PH languages. The changes in both cases are recent, though one must admit that the *r* to *h* change is even more recent than the change of *b* to *p* or *ph*. Both were areal rather than genetic phenomena.

Vickery says at one point that we do not know whether Sukhothai had a P or a PH language. Presumably he means that we do not know whether the letter now called *phɔɔ* was pronounced *p* or *ph* at Sukhothai. Of course we know that it was pronounced *b,* so Sukhothai had neither a P language nor a PH language, but a B language.

Both Vickery and Nidhi have many pages of discussion of this P and PH matter. It all looks very scientific, like the formulae for the quality of water in a swimming pool or an aquarium. But it is all irrelevant, and any reader who encounters pages in either English or Thai sprinkled with the letters P and PH can safely skip them.

The Young Turks have accepted most of Chamberlain's views about linguistic history, but appear to have rejected one of his more radical ideas. He believes that the Tai-speaking people first acquired their writing system far to the east, in Vietnam, very early, from the Chams. Even these Young Turks or devils, usually so eager to believe everything Chamberlain says, have apparently found this too hard to swallow. They barely mention it.

A curious notion pops up from time to time in the writings of the Young Turks. It is that the dialect of Sukhothai cannot be assumed to be directly descended from Proto-Tai. What on earth this is supposed to mean is difficult to see. Every Tai dialect is ultimately but directly descended from the proto-language. Sometimes this strange argument is advanced to discount identifications that past scholars have made of puzzling archaic Sukhothai words with words found in other Tai languages. The arrogance of this is revolting. Apparently only

their own appalling methods and assumptions are acceptable. Those of such giants of the past as Coedès are questioned.

Another notion crops up now and then in the writings of the devils, that the pronunciation of the tones at Sukhothai was similar to modern Bangkok pronunciation. We do not know what the three tones of the Sukhothai period sounded like, but there is no way that they could have resembled the modern five tones, or that we could know it if they did. All we have in the inscription is abstract symbols to mark the tones. This is carrying error and confusion to the point of lunacy, as if a demented entomologist were babbling about the resemblances between a caterpillar and the butterfly into which it had metamorphosed, or rather some other kind of butterfly (different dialect). No, perhaps this mischievous metaphor is unfair, since the Young Turks claim that the Sukhothai caterpillar was a butterfly in disguise.

Dr. Piriya Krairiksh, in his Siam Society lecture of August, 1988,* is less Turkish, less devilish, than the others in that he does not get into the larger questions of linguistic history in which they have gotten so bogged down. On the other hand, he goes farther than they have done, in alleging that Inscription One was fabricated by Prince Mongkut while still a monk, in the 1830's. This idea seems to me preposterous on the face of it, for reasons which I will explain at the end of this paper.

Dr. Piriya's lecture seems to me to be a fantastic tour de force, an exercise in scholarly sleight of hand from first to last. It is difficult to make detailed comments, partly because the copy I have says "not to be quoted," but also because of the nature of the arguments.

For example, when words and expressions are found in Inscription One, but in no other Sukhothai inscriptions, this is regarded as evidence that Inscription One is a fake. On the other hand, when words and expressions in Inscription One agree

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* Chapter 2, p.53, this volume.

with words and expressions in other Sukhothai inscriptions, this is taken as evidence that a later author in composing Inscription One cribbed from these other inscriptions. Why not assume rather that these were all simply part of the language at the time?

Many words are cited which occur in Inscription One but, according to Dr. Piriya, not again until much later in Thai texts, in most cases not until Bangkok times (1782–present). The insidious implication, again and again, is that these were not in the language until the time of the later texts in which Dr. Piriya finds them.

One is beguiled into assuming that Dr. Piriya's statements that this word or that is not found in Thai until much later is based on a thorough search. We now learn that this apparently is not the case. Colonel M.R.W. Supawat Kasemsri reports that he and Dr. Prasert have succeeded in finding a great many of these words in other early inscriptions and early texts, and gives the specific references.[3] This does great damage to Dr. Piriya's whole argument; one might go so far as to say that it won't take much more of this kind of thing to blow his case sky-high.

But in any case, at least some of these words have been found in a hasty check to occur in other languages of the Tai family, indicating that they have a perfect right to have been, and indeed must have been, a part of the Thai language continuously. For example, *phâay* 'to defeat' (1.6) occurs in White Tai.

We are told that the word *pùa* (1.15), of uncertain meaning, is found in the dialect of the Lao Song meaning 'a man,' but that the Lao Song came to Thailand in 1792. As Dr. Piriya says, the Lao Song are speakers of Black Tai. But there is much more than this to be said regarding this word.

It is found in many modern Tai dialects, but always with the tone that would be modern Thai first or mid-level tone, earlier A tone, so that at Sukhothai it ought to have been written with no tone mark. The inscription is so marred at this point that one cannot be sure whether there was a tone mark or not. Probably not, in view of the evidence from other dialects.

The meaning in modern Tai dialects varies from one region to another. In Lue the word refers to some sort of minor official. I recall hearing recently a social scientist who had studied economic and social structure in Sip Song Pan Na discuss the Lue term at length, mistakenly, however, conjecturing that this was the same word as Thai *phɔ̂ɔ* 'father.' One of my Lue informants from across the border in Burma told me that where he came from the word refers to the ringleader of a gang.

I reported many years ago that in White, Black and Red Tai the word means 'king,' not just hereditary chief or ruling prince of a city, but a king like the king of Laos or the king of Thailand.[4]

Inscription One uses the word in speaking of people who have no *pua* or *naan*. The modern usage in Lue suggests that the Sukhothai expression may have meant people who have no subordinates, no retinue. Professor David Wyatt seems to lean this way in his fine translation included with his paper for this panel, when he says "no young men and women of rank." On the other hand, when I reported the meaning 'king' in White, Black, and Red Tai in 1964, I thought that this suggested that the Sukhothai expression meant "has no king, has no queen (to depend upon)." The question is whether the inscription is referring to subordinates or superiors. Probably we should regard this as an open question until more information turns up.

I believe further study of Dr. Piriya's examples would show other cases where words that he finds in Inscription One but not again in Thai until much later, are found to occur in other languages of the family. And there are probably many words which never show up at all in the Sukhothai materials, but occur later in Thai, which can be shown by their occurrence in related languages to be a legitimate part of the inherited native vocabulary.

Dr. Piriya skips over some interesting words without comment. Lines 2 and 3 of the first side contain the archaic pronouns *tuu* and *phťa*. Dr. Piriya glosses *tuu* as 'pronoun of the first person plural,' and *phťa* as 'first person pronoun generally

used in literature.' The Royal Institute dictionary glosses *tuu* as *chăn, raw, khâa,*' that is, 'I, we,' and glosses *phťa* as *'khâa, chăn,'* that is, 'I.' None of these glosses is quite right.

The pronoun *tuu* occurs in other Tai languages, and means 'we (exclusive),' that is, 'we, not including you,' so that it is different from the other first person plural pronoun *raw*, which earlier meant 'we, including you.' (In modern Thai many still use *raw* in this way, and sometimes to mean 'you' or 'I.' The frequent modern use of *raw* meaning 'we, not including you,' is probably due to the influence of English and other European languages).

The pronoun *phťa* involves an even nicer subtlety. Where it is found in other Tai languages it means 'we, dual, exclusive,' that is, 'we two, he or she and I, not including you.'[5]

In Inscription One these two pronouns are used in exactly the right meanings. So the author of the inscription understood these two pronouns better than the compilers of the Royal Institute dictionary, and better than Dr. Piriya. If, as alleged, Prince Mongkut, or any other modern author, fabricated the inscription, could he also have known better than these scholars the exact correct meaning of these ancient pronouns? The correct use of these two pronouns in Inscription One may be among the strongest pieces of evidence for its authenticity.

At 2.19, regarding the word *khàp* 'to sing,' Dr. Piriya tells us: "In Sukhothai inscription[s] *khàp* does not mean 'to sing' but 'to drive.' " This is too hasty. It is true that *khàp* 'to drive' does occur in Inscription One, on side 1, lines 5 and 7. Modern Thai has both words, now pronounced alike. In many other Tai languages both words occur but are pronounced differently, and linguists reconstruct different original initial consonants for the two words. These two words are among those for which Anthony Diller has shown that at Sukhothai there were two different initial consonant letters used consistently, no doubt representing a difference in pronunciation still maintained at the time of Inscription One, but later lost in Thai.

It is difficult to imagine how a 19th century author, before

the time of printed books in Thailand, could have had access to all the epigraphic and literary texts which Dr. Piriya thinks were used as sources in the composition of Inscription One.

The rest of my comments are rather miscellaneous, and will be presented in more or less random order.

Dr. Nidhi has an unusual idea to explain why modern writing systems do not represent the sounds of the languages efficiently, citing Khmer, Thai, and English, Khmer with its horrendous system of two readings for each vowel symbol depending upon the initial consonant, Thai with its elaborate rules for how to read the tones, depending upon which of three classes of consonants the initial belongs to, and English with its notorious irregularities. He proposes this explanation: that in each case the writing system was originally used for the language of sacred texts, and did so efficiently, with one symbol for each sound. But each system had to be distorted in these complicated ways when adapted to the writing of the vernacular language.

Of course the explanation is actually that each writing system did, at the time it was first used for the vernacular, represent the sounds of the spoken language with fair accuracy and efficiency, but later, in each case, sound changes occurred while the writing system remained unchanged, resulting in the complicated and illogical modern systems. This is what happened in Khmer, in Thai, and in English.

I have suggested on several occasions in the past that the reason writing systems began to be introduced for the Tai vernacular languages at various places at about the same time was the introduction of a new religion, Theravada Buddhism, which was more democratic than the previously dominant religions, Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism.[6]

Others have favored a political explanation. Probably political and religious factors were both involved; there seems to be no doubt that the introduction of Theravada Buddhism from Thailand contributed to the collapse of the Khmer Empire centered at Angkor.

But whatever the cause, it is striking that writing systems for Tai dialects sprang up in many places at about the same time, around the beginning of the 14th century A.D.

Those who were faced with the task of adapting previous Mon and Khmer writing systems to the Tai languages had to figure out what to do about sounds for which there were no symbols, for example the tones, and some consonant sounds, and such vowels as the dipthongs *ia, ĭa, ua.*

That there must have been considerable contact among the various places is indicated by the many similarities in the solutions found for these new problems. On the other hand, some places found, or experimented with, devices not found elsewhere.

There must have been a number of teacher-scribes at work, at various schools. Some of these were probably more ingenious, or more innovative and daring, than others.

Whoever inscribed Inscription One must have been one of the brighter and more innovative among these. He, or his school, devised a more accurate system of marking tones, and used it more consistently, than others. At many places no attempt was made at all to mark tones.

And one of his bolder innovations was the writing of vowel symbols on the line. Some authors on the side of the angels have pointed out that it is not true to say that only this inscription follows this practice. They point out that in some of the other Sukhothai inscriptions some vowels, for example in the words *ʔĭ̂n* 'other' and *ìik* 'again' are written on the line.

The devils have argued that it is implausible for the author of the first inscription to have done such a fine job of writing tone marks, while elsewhere there was much inconsistency and error or failure to write tone marks at all, until modern times.

It seems to me this could very easily have happened, especially considering how little has survived of all the written material that must have been produced through the centuries. Many years ago I worked through some hundreds of the National Library manuscripts of Thai literary classics, mostly

written in the 19th century. I was constantly amazed at the variety in writing styles. Some manuscripts had shapes for letters or combinations of letters that I had never seen. Some marked tones consistently and accurately, while others made frequent errors or omitted tone marks sometimes, or altogether. We are all familiar with the same phenomena in the handwriting of the less educated among modern Thais.

One might argue that the imperfect attempts to mark the tones which we find at Sukhothai after Inscription One and down through the centuries even until the present time, imply that the scribes were aware of a complete and consistent system of tone markings, sometimes carefully followed but often not, but always there as an ideal to be emulated, which finally won the day with the introduction of printing in the 19th century and general public education a little later. No doubt there have been in all periods many scribes, as there are certainly many nowadays who try to write Thai, who simply lack a clear and full understanding of the rules.

Incidentally, I don't take much interest in the suggestion raised by many, on both sides of the controversy, that the tone marks were devised to help foreigners, or speakers of other dialects, in learning the language. It seems to me most probable that tone marks, where used, were intended by the scribes to mark accurately the sound distinctions of their own speech.

The suggestion that the author of Inscription One was brighter, more independent, bolder and more innovative than those who composed the other inscriptions may also explain why, in the opinion of some, Inscription One differs in style, vocabulary, and subject matter from the other inscriptions.

Many, both angels and devils, have described the vocabulary used in Inscription One as simpler, more down to earth, more native (with fewer learned foreign words) than that of the other inscriptions (a few have argued that the difference is not so great as claimed), and have discussed the curious fact that Ram Khamhaeng as described in Inscription One is a different sort of person from the one described in the other inscriptions.

In the one the emphasis is on warlike qualities, in the others on religious piety. A few years ago I had occasion, in preparing a paper on the literary activities of the Chakri monarchs, to go through the chronicles of the first four Bangkok reigns. To my amazement, in these chronicles composed in the Fifth Reign I could find no mention of the great literary works composed at court, even in the First and Second Reigns, although nowadays most would regard these literary works, both poetry and prose, including important translations, as among the greatest achievements of those reigns. So the people who write history exhibit great differences in what they regard as interesting and admirable and worthy of mention.

There has been much discussion of the alleged misspelling in Inscription One of the word for 'sky,' modern Thai *fáa,* with various theories expounded to explain the supposed error. As many have pointed out, when the word occurs alone it is spelled correctly (side 4, line 3), but when it follows the word for 'serf,' modern *phrây* (perhaps better translated 'commoner'), at five places in the inscription, one finds the word invariably spelled with the letter we now call *fɔ̌ɔ,* a high consonant in modern terminology, instead of the low consonant *fɔɔ* which we would expect in the word for 'sky.' The occurrences are as follows, in modern pronunciation: *phrây fâa* (1.24), *phrây fâa nâa săy* (1.6, 21), *phrây fâa khâa thay* (1.23), *phrây fâa nâa pòk* (1.32-3). (Dr. Piriya, in his usual hasty fashion, silently corrects the reading to *fáa* everywhere.)

I believe the explanation for this anomaly is simple, and if I am right then all that has been written about it should be discarded. I believe this is not the word for 'sky' at all, but the old Tai word for 'cloud,' correctly spelled at every occurrence. This word is still used in all Tai languages except Central Thai, where it has been replaced in the primary meaning of 'cloud' by the Indic loanword *mêek,* from Sanskrit and Pali *megha,* with the old native word *fâa* retained in certain secondary meanings.

This item, if I am right, would constitute further evidence for the authenticity of the inscription, since it would imply that the scribe knew what he was doing better than we had thought.

Why one should speak of 'cloud serfs' I can't imagine, but then neither does 'sky serfs' make much sense. Possibly the opposition to *săy* 'clear' was once significant. The reference may be to tattooing on the face, or lack of it.

Dr. Prasert Na Nagara is a leading scholar on the side of the fuddy-duddies or angels. His contributions to the study of Thai epigraphy have been monumental. In one of two articles contributed to the special issue of *Sinlapa Watthanatham*, this one on "Thai Writing," he has uncharacteristically made an error which should be pointed out and corrected. He discusses the word *hăa* (side 4 line 9) in the expression *hăa khrây cay nay cay,* apparently meaning something like 'wished in his heart,' and identifies this word with a White Tai word *haa* meaning 'by oneself.' It is true that White Tai has a word like this, occurring very frequently after the subject and before the verb in a sentence, meaning something like '(he or she,) for his or her part, (did so and so).' But the White Tai word is *haa*$^{?}$, with a final glottal stop lost when another word follows closely, with high rising tone. This final glottal stop comes from an earlier final *k,* and the word is still written *haak* in White Tai script. This final *k,* and the tone, tell us that this is the same word as Thai *hàak,* not *hăa,* so we are back to having to read the Sukhothai word as *hăa* 'to seek,' used idiomatically in some way.

Scholars have been bothered, some more than others, by the use of the verb 'to put,' modern *sày,* where the inscription tells us what Ram Khamhaeng did about Thai writing (4.10, 11). Some assume it meant 'to invent.' How one interprets this curious verb is crucial to the question whether Ram Khamhaeng invented the script from scratch, or did something else.

I was startled once in working on a more remote Tai dialect to be told that in that dialect this word meant 'to repair,' for example to repair a thatched roof. I don't remember where this dialect was spoken, and my fieldnotes are not at the moment accessible to me. In any case, this alone would not be enough to prove anything. But it opens the possibility that at Sukhothai this word may have meant not 'to put' or 'to invent,' but 'to repair.' This would be a very attractive interpretation. It would

mean that what Ram Khamhaeng did was to take something already existing, a Mon or Khmer script or an earlier Thai script, and make improvements and corrections. I suggest that we all ought to be on the lookout, in studying older texts from everywhere, as well as dialect materials, to see if there is any possibility that this meaning 'to repair' may have been more widespread in earlier times.

The devils have made a good deal out of the word *triibuun* or *triibuurá?*, literally 'triple wall' or 'three walls,' whereas archaeological evidence tells us that it was only much later that Sukhothai acquired a second and third wall. Some of the angels have proposed various explanations, that this is a Tamil word and does not mean 'triple wall' at all, or that two of the walls may have been made of perishable materials, etc.

I would like to offer the angels another possible explanation. Words sometimes lose their original or etymological meaning. Today a drinking glass is still called a glass even if made of plastic. There is an old joke in Ireland about 'copper-bottoming the tops of the houses with tin.' In English a trivet is supposed, etymologically, to have three feet, but nowadays a trivet is still called a trivet even if it has more than three feet.

And later Thai usage is replete with expressions literally referring to larger numbers than the truth would permit. Think of the dowager queens known as 'The Thousand Years.'

So maybe a city wall that was actually single was called by a term which had lost its literal etymological meaning, or which was a conventional exaggeration.

Finally, to turn for a moment to non-linguistic matters, I find the idea that Prince Mongkut while still a monk fabricated Inscription One preposterous, for the following two reasons:

First, how could he have gotten away with it? I don't know what his living quarters in the monastery were like, but I remember being taken many years ago to see the quarters at Wat Pho of Mongkut's great contemporary and his uncle, the famous monk-poet-scholar Somdet Krom Phraya Paramanuchit,

and they were very simple and small. How could he find the privacy for this secret activity?

How could he conceal it from his fellow monks, and from visitors, for example his two young sons who came to see him regularly for instruction and advice? He could not have acquired the stone, or handled it, without help. Other secret activities of his, some political and some personal, known to far fewer people than this operation would have to have been, have been revealed by his contemporaties in writing or are preserved orally in anecdotes among his descendants.

Perhaps we are to imagine that it was all done during his trip upcountry, but would there have been time enough? And as a visitor among strangers, presumably putting up at local monasteries, he would have been even more exposed to the risk that people would find out what he was doing and tell.

And in 1836, three years after the inscription is supposed to have been found and brought to Bangkok, a committee headed by his cousin, also a monk, Prince Paraves, undertook to decipher the text. Did Prince Mongkut deceive his cousin? Or was his cousin in on the plot, and if so did Prince Paraves conceal the truth from the committee he headed? Couldn't any of them see that the carving was only a few years old?

And if Prince Mongkut was the author, how could he allow this committee to do such a poor job in its first attempt to decipher the text? And the supposed author himself later provided an annotated copy to foreigners, representing also a poor beginning at deciphering a text which, according to the proposed theory of fakery, he had himself composed.

Second, an act of this sort would have been totally out of character. We know a great deal about King Mongkut's personality and character from his own voluminous writings and those of his contemporaries and his juniors, and from anecdotes preserved orally. Everything we know about him reveals him as a man of the most intense intellectual and personal honesty. One of his granddaughters told me a story many years ago which I

don't recall ever seeing in print. After he became king, an official interested in genealogical research decided to try to prove *that King Rama I was descended from, or somehow related to,* Ayutthaya royalty' When King Mongkut learned of this enterprise, he is supposed to have said, in effect: "Everyone knows that King Rama I was originally a commoner. And everyone knows the circumstances by which he became king. Ancestry had nothing to do with it. So drop it."

And I wish we could drop this whole notion that Inscription One is a fake. It has polluted and contaminated the atmosphere in Thai studies for quite long enough. Iconoclasm and revisionism in scholarship are all very well, and have sometimes led to great advances, but what we have here is nothing but flashy, shallow sensationalism based on misguided assumptions and faulty evidence. The whole controversy over the authenticity of Sukhothai Inscription One has been a waste of everyone's time.

Notes

1. Dr. Nidhi Aeusrivongse, in one of his articles in the special issue of *Sinlapa Watthanatham* devoted to the controversy over Inscription One, says: "Linguists have found that the change of voiced sounds to voiceless did not occur at the same time in all dialects. This knowledge enables linguists to find out which dialect is related to which dialect by examining the history of the sound changes of the language." (p. 72). This is not quite right. Linguists usually cannot tell anything about the time of the changes, except sometimes when it is possible to deduce that one change must have preceded another. It is the differences in the patterns of changes, not the time, that we work with.

2. They are apparently here and throughout their discussion of questions of linguistic history adopting conclusions reached by James Chamberlain. For possible supporting arguments and evidence, never mentioned by the Young Turks, one would have to make a study of Chamberlain's work, which would be outside the scope of our topic, the authenticity of Sukhothai Inscription One.

   But now Dr. Chamberlain, in a letter dated February 18, 1989, responding to a first draft of this paper of which I had sent him a copy, writes me: "...your absolutely erroneous characterization of me as party to the attempt to prove Inscription I is a fake. I have never, repeat never, in print or in voice supported any of Vickery's or Piriya's or anyone else's attempts to do so. If Vickery has used or misrepresented any of my work it was his own decision. I have on several occasions tried to discourage him from pursuing the entire subject." And later in the same letter: "If someone misinterprets what I say, I cannot be liable."

   Dr. Chamberlain has given me permission to quote the foregoing, but asks that I also quote the following paragraphs from the same letter:

"As I read your paper, all the evidence for the later occurrence of the devoicing sound shift comes from the Ayutthaya period and Central Thai. From here, you jump to the conclusion that Sukhothai is included in this sub-group. Well, I disagree. I do not think that Sukhothai is a part of this sub-group, and have said so in print. Since the sound shift admittedly had to travel, it presumably began somewhere at some time, and ended somewhere at some time. The time when it began, as you point out, is impossible to say exactly. The P-PH classification relates mainly to the SW branch (I said probably the Central languages – here, in a letter you wrote me at the time, you agreed with the system for SW but had reservations about the Central group.) The P-PH distinction is indeed *relatively* recent, but does have historic and linguistic validity.

"What I have termed the P languages form a contiguous east to west line from Vietnam through Phongsaly, Lanna, Sip Song Pan Na, the Shan States, to Assam. This pattern cannot be accidental. Since Tai kingdoms in those areas further west can be shown to date from the 12th c., and since east to west communications were difficult (the trade routes went from north to south, criss-crossing at Luang Prabang), I hypothesized that this sound change occurred before the movement of Tai peoples to those areas. Otherwise, if the sound change occurred later, we would expect a blotchy intermixing of aspirated and unaspirated in the voiced series.

"This intermixing, however, does occur, as I tried to show in 1971, along the Lao-North Vietnam border. Perhaps the PH languages began the sound shift later. Whatever actually happened, you have identified the approximate date and geographical area of the tail end of the change, but not the beginning."

3. In a talk which was part of a symposium on 16 Nov., 1988, organized by the Archaeological Society. A transcript of a tape recording was published in *Sinlapa Watthanatham* in

the issue for January, 1989, pp. 58-67. The subject we are interested in is dealt with on p. 67.

4. P. 47 in Gedney 1964, p. 461 in the reprint in Gedney 1989.

5. Strecker 1984 deals with *phťa* on pp. 62 – 8, and *tuu* on pp. 81– 8.

6. Dr. Nidhi has a similar view. In the first of his three articles in the special issue of *Sinlapa Watthanatham*, pp. 60–1, he speaks of a new, more democratic religion, shared by rulers and their subjects, with also a new custom of translating the sacred texts into the vernacular, and compares the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

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